

# COMFORT DEPLOYMENT 2019: A NURSE'S JOURNEY

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Lt. Cmdr. Kim Hendricks, a nurse assigned to the hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20), holds a child at a temporary medical treatment site in St. George's, Grenada, Sept. 20, 2019. Comfort is working with health and government partners in Central America, South America and the Caribbean to provide care on the ship and at land-based medical sites, helping to relieve pressure on national healthcare systems, including those strained by an increase in cross-border migrants. (U.S. Army photo by

Spc. Jacob Gleich)

## USN

After 10 years in the Navy, I finally crossed this item off my bucket list: go on a humanitarian mission on one of the hospital ships. Many staff aboard the USNS Comfort for Deployment 2019 were tasked or “voluntold” to be there. I begged and pleaded to go, jumping up and down screaming, “Send me! Send me!” I fully embraced the adventure I was embarking upon with hundreds of healthcare providers from the U.S. military, partner nation militaries, and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). In June 2019, we began our five-month voyage to Central and South America and the Caribbean on a mission to strengthen ties with neighboring nations and assist nations directly impacted by the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. I had no idea the impact this mission would have on so many lives, including my own.

As a Pediatric Clinical Nurse Specialist, I assumed I would be on the Women and Children's Ward, in a role similar to that from my home command. Instead, I was selected to be a medsite Nurse Manager, responsible for coordinating clinical care and patient flow through temporary medical clinics serving 500-800 patients per day. I was hesitant and questioned if I was truly the right person for the job. I had never been on one of these missions and had no idea what a medsite looked like, much less how one functioned. How was I supposed to lead when I felt completely blind?

I took a deep breath and decided to lead through faith, enthusiasm and experience. I put faith in my leaders and colleagues, maintained a positive attitude and relied on my clinical skills from a diverse career in nursing. I learned to think on my feet and to function in austere conditions. This deployment allowed me to grow in my life personally and professionally and will be something I will never forget.

I will never forget the patients – their stories, their struggles, their sense of hope. I spoke with the mother of an infant who just wanted medicine for his fever. I spoke with a Venezuelan migrant with a who had been without essential supplies and care for years because his family had to flee their country with no resources or support. Often patients cheered for us as we arrived at the medsite, each day, having waited overnight on the street in the cold to be seen. There were a multitude of smiling faces, handshakes, and hugs from patients whose lives were changed by our seemingly simple acts – receiving a pair of glasses, having their teeth cleaned, or having healthcare providers listen to their concerns.



190710-N-MU198-1013 CALLAO, Peru (July 10, 2019) Lt. Cmdr. Kim Hendricks, a Navy nurse assigned to the hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20), plays with kid patients at a temporary medical site. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Danny Rav Nuñez Jr.)

To say I met hundreds of people along the way would be a gross underestimate. We, as a crew, on the USNS Comfort touched the lives of thousands of people – patients and their family members, host nation Ministry of Health Personnel, and volunteers from NGOs around the world. Translators, many of whom were volunteers, were with us every step of the way in Spanish and Creole-speaking countries and openly shared their culture (and sometimes food!) with us. We were welcomed in most places with open arms, and made a positive, lasting impact in each country we visited. This was the first time we had visited some of the island countries, such as St. Lucia, where I was able to work side-by-side with their nurses to coordinate follow-on care for the patients. I even participated in Nursing Subject Matter Expert Exchanges, one of which was at a special needs orphanage in Panama. I worked with the Nursing Director to discuss long-term care for the children and support nursing skill development with their staff.

Serving on the USNS Comfort presented a challenging, humbling, and rewarding experience that fundamentally changed my life and the lives of so many others. It is something that everyone in healthcare should experience, and something I hope to do again. I confess, I have since added “go on another humanitarian mission” to my bucket list as I anxiously await rumors of another mission on the horizon.